

Around Grandfather Burdick's Dining Table

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(Gary is one of our more creative Burdick relatives. He is inventor of the game, "Dungeons and Dragons" which I know many of us have enjoyed playing. Gary's list of credits and accomplishments is about a mile long -- he even has a strain of bacteria named after him! He was kind enough to provide us with the following insight into his formative years. Thanks! - HB)

I am told that I made my first journey to the home of my maternal grandparents, Hugh Abram and Grace Elizabeth (Downing) Burdick in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, sleeping on a pillow in the Nash sedan my father drove from Chicago. That trip was made in August 1938 some two or three weeks after I was born on the morning of 27 July. How well I liked all that is quite unknown to me, but the visit was repeated for the entire month of August each year thereafter until we moved into the house permanently in 1946*. I can say that as early as I can remember things, and that goes back to around one year of age, I loved being at my grandparents home. The earliest I can recall with assurance being there is when I was just age two or three—1940 or 1941. In the evening I was put into a child's crib when I wanted to be with the grownups, so in typical fashion I attempted a crib-break, lost my balance atop the bars, and hit the oak floor with a bang heard downstairs that matched the volume of my wailing. That was something I did not attempt a second time.

Whether when we spent August with my grandparents, or afterwards when each year we all lived together as an extended family until grandfather and grandmother went south to Florida or California for the cold months (mid-October through March), mealtimes at 925 Dodge Street were always special. All were in the dining room, and usually with all persons in the house present. In the summer that meant quite a crowd, as relatives from all over came to Hugh and Grace's home for a visit. There were six upstairs bedrooms, a downstairs sewing room (formerly the maid's room) with an oak, Mission Style daybed that Grandfather Hugh had made, and chaise lounges on the upstairs front porch and front porch. Many a time I recall all four spare bedrooms being filled, my own needed to house another relative, and thus I had the special treat of sleeping on a chaise lounge, or even the downstairs swing, on one of the porches...if all the other spaces were taken by young people up for such "roughing it." There were many cousins and in-laws there, Burdicks and Gygages too, but when Great Uncles Paul and Hazen Burdick came from the West to visit their birthplace things were especially festive.

Breakfast was always quite subdued, but lunch saw more lively repartee, and conversation around the dinner table was always splendid when there was a large gathering. Tales of former days were the main subject matter such as Uncle Russell Burdick in the 2nd Wisconsin Cavalry Regiment down in Baton Rouge where he was wounded, the family camping in a floored tent in Williams Bay to escape the summer's heat, Grandfather and his brothers hunting and fishing in the wilds around and on Duck Lake (now named Lake Como and heavily populated). One of my favorite subjects was the arrival of the "Millionaire Special" train on Friday evening, when carriages drawn by splendidly matched teams of horses with liveried coachman and footmen were there to pick up their masters, the dozens of wealthy men that summered in palatial residences around the shores of Geneva Lake.

In most such accounts joviality was paramount. Of course I was usually "excused" just when the adult exchanges became especially interesting to a young lad. There are two stories I shall always remember, though likely I was just too young to hear many another great tale...I did play the part of a Little Picture with Big Ears a few times, so I managed to hear a few of those racy anecdotes, but none of them were as choice to me as these:

"Cousin Gardie" (Gardner Burdick) was often the subject of after dinner conversation. As best I recall it was he that was the most footloose of the family. His major exploit was this: One day he decided that he wished to take a little trip. So he put a few things into his canoe, launched it into the White River (the outlet of Lake Geneva) and paddled off. From the White he went on to the Des Plaines, then the Fox, on to the Illinois, and then the Mississippi itself. When he got to New Orleans Cousin Gardie decided to see a bit more of the world, so he got a job as a deck hand on a banana boat and sailed off to Central or South America somewhere. Eventually he came back to Lake Geneva, presumably aboard an Illinois Central train. His return was as nonchalant as his departure...at least in his eyes.

When I learned of that I was awestruck, for Tom Sawyer was my boyhood idol, and I could only dream of such derring-do. Nothing I ever did could match his feat!

“Uncle Byron” (Byron Burdick, Grandfather Hugh’s uncle) lived at what was then the north end of Lake Geneva. He kept a cow, and some years before I was born Uncle Byron would make a daily milk delivery for my grandparents—grandfather did not believe in drinking pasteurized milk. As my mother recounted for my benefit, he would always tell some interesting story when he delivered the bucket of milk, then depart with, “More anon,” as his closing. That is not the truly interesting part, only a bit of background. Uncle Byron’s character is what was compelling, as proven by this true account as oft repeated around the dinner table:

When he was a young man Uncle Byron attended medical school. Just prior to receiving his M.D. he quit. When asked why he did such a thing, Uncle Byron said flatly: “I have come to the conclusion that men don’t give a damn about their bodies.”

He then enrolled in theology classes, spent years studying, and again, just before receiving his D.D. Uncle Byron left that school. Asked why he stated: “I have come to the conclusion that men don’t give a damn about their souls.”

Thereafter, he spent most of his time at home reading, while his wife supported the family. When one of his daughters asked what she should say when someone asked what her father did, Uncle Byron told her: “Tell them I am a seeker after truth!”

Needless to say, even a very young listener was stimulated in regards development of a sense of humor by the stories told around Grandfather Hugh Burdick’s dining table. It goes without saying that much of my desire for adventure and love of books, reading, and imaginative thinking came from that very same source. Of course, the genes I possessed were the sort that enabled those characteristics.

*My father, Ernest Gygax, owned land in La Jolla, California. When the neighborhood (on the North Side at 4113 Kenmore Avenue near Sheridan Road and Irving Park—now again an upscale locale) in which was our two-flat residence in Chicago began to go sharply downhill, he decided to retire from his salesman position at Maurice L. Rothschild’s downtown store and remove the family to La Jolla where he would have a suitable house built. Of course at age seven I hated to leave my neighborhood friends in Chicago, but as I had pals in Lake Geneva, and my best friends could visit from Chicago, I was not inconsolable. Father planned to spend one year in Lake Geneva, but as there was no work for him in the La Jolla area, and he did not wish to retire, we remained in Lake Geneva, he commuting daily via the Chicago & Northwestern Railway until 1953 when he did retire due to ill health. Of course I might have had something to do with his decision, as I begged to be left behind to live with grandfather and grandmother if he and mother did move to California...That my father decided to remain in Lake Geneva was surely a benison to my development, as growing up in an extended family certainly broadened my mind and perspectives.